



# Essentials of EMERGENCY planning

At some point in your career there will be an emergency, and you will be in charge. Here are five ways to help ensure you are ready.

Principals and other administrators seem to be perpetually overworked. There's always something that still needs to be done at the end of the day, and it's easy for disaster planning and preparedness to keep slipping to the bottom of the list. However, disaster preparation is essential, even when planning for the unknown. At some point in every school administrator's career, there will be some kind of emergency incident – and YOU will be in charge. Taking care of just these five items will help ensure that you will be ready.

## **1. Vulnerability assessment – How to tell what the hazards are**

A vulnerability assessment helps your school discover hazards and then eliminate, prepare for and respond to the various hazards found on the school site and in the surrounding area. After identifying the hazards, the school can then identify and prioritize the actions it should take to mitigate or prevent the vulnerabilities.

This is best accomplished using a team approach. The head of the team is usually the school principal or other administrator, and others on the team may be a security staff person, the plant manager, other school staff, a parent, a representative from local fire and/or EMS, or others concerned with safety issues at your school.

Your team should first conduct a site survey to identify hazards. This is not the same thing as a safety audit conducted for compliance issues, although some of the issues raised may be the same. Vulnerability assessments can be divided into two parts – school hazards and community hazards. The school hazard assessment is made up of everything that is on school property, while the community hazard assessment refers to everything in the neighborhood surrounding the school.

A few of the things to look for during the school hazard assessment are: location

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*By Jill M. Barnes*

of utility lines and pipes and shut-offs; untrimmed trees and shrubs that allow access to roofs of school buildings or act as concealment spaces; checking that all classroom doors have the room number clearly visible (and room numbers on windows on other sides of the classroom); exit strategies for students with physical disabilities; unsecured contents in rooms and unsecured exits to the school, among many other potential hazards.

Considerations for the community hazards assessment include: crime statistics and school incidence statistics; nearby industrial buildings with hazardous materials storage; proximity to freeways and major thoroughfares, public works projects and facilities, military installations and prisons, to name a few.

Your team then uses the findings from the site assessment to improve your school's all-hazard plan. There are several assessment tools available; choose one that best reflects your school's individual needs. The tool should include a scale for rating hazards, address all four phases of emergency management for schools, and center on ongoing assessment and improvement. Only by conducting a vulnerability assessment can you accurately gauge which hazards you need to include in your disaster plan.

## **2. School all-hazard plan – What to do in emergency situations**

Your school plan (which is required of every public school in California) should be based on the hazards found during the vulnerability assessment. Complete your safe school plan promptly and keep it up to date, reviewing it when staff members are hired or leave the school. Some districts have a template to follow to create your plan.

Have the plan readily available by shortcut on key computers, and printed out in binders in several locations. Share the plan with others, so that several people will know what to do in emergency situations. Keep student information lists updated, too.

Printouts of these plans and lists work well during a disaster, in case there is no electricity to work from computers. Inclement weather may also keep you from using computers, and printouts allow you to

quickly divide a workload among a group of people with no duplication of effort.

Usually, the school hazard plan is completed by the principal or another site administrator. Your plan should be specific to your school, and as detailed as possible – no one knows your school as well as you do! The contents of the safe school plan should address all four phases of emergency management, which are mitigation, prepared-



ness, response and recovery. Your plan can be organized into two sections. One section comprises mitigation and preparation activities that a school implements before a disaster. This section addresses findings of the vulnerability assessment, and also includes drill and training procedures, categorized emergency supply lists and locations of supplies, and the duties and personnel assigned to each disaster team. The other section includes response and recovery actions during and following an emergency.

Specific procedures should be provided for every possible emergency situation, from aircraft crashes to unlawful walkouts. An easy rule to remember is that if the threat to the students is outside the building, keep everyone inside and use the building for protection. If the threat to the students is inside the building or is the building itself, evacuate the building.

Earthquakes and lockdowns are two specific emergency situations for which it is vital to include procedures. Earthquakes are a very real hazard in California, and

are capable of great damage and can generate other hazards. An earthquake can lead to gas leaks, downed power lines and lack of electricity, fires, floods, injuries, entrapment and infrastructure failures. A school that has a comprehensive plan in place for an earthquake is pretty well prepared generally. The other situation for which it is important to be prepared is lockdowns. A school lockdown is activated any time

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there is activity that threatens the safety of a school's students, faculty and staff. There are several reasons why a school may initiate a campus lockdown, including an intruder on campus, a police action in the area, a disruptive community incident, or even a dangerous animal on campus.

Situations requiring lockdowns occur in California on a regular basis – a lockdown is the most frequently activated emergency plan in LAUSD. Usually these lockdowns are activated because of something happening in the area, not on campus. Because of the frequency of lockdowns, it is important to be prepared for them.

## **3. Know your school population – Who has special needs during a disaster**

When a disaster strikes, some students need more support than others. These students may not be in your special education program, and may not have IEPs. Don't wait for a disaster to find out who these students are. Use information from parents, classroom teachers, counselors, the school nurse

and other personnel to compile a list of which students on your campus have what kinds of specific needs. Remember that most medical and special education information is confidential.

The students will fall into one or more of the following categories: mobility impairments, sensory impairments, health impairments and cognitive impairments. Design and practice your emergency plans

evacuating. Make sure that these students are accounted for right away during a disaster. Also prioritize accounting for students with communication impairments, as they may not be able to easily call for help if injured or trapped during a disaster. A student with a cognitive impairment may not understand evacuation directions or procedures. Extra drills with these students help normalize these procedures, as does using a visual/

travel with the student, or be stored in the classroom and brought out when students evacuate.

Medication might be an issue as well. Schools do not generally have several days of prescription medication on hand for each student, and this can lead to student health being compromised during a disaster. Ask parents to request extra medications from their child's doctor to be stored at the school for such use. If you have students on ventilators or other vital battery-powered equipment, a generator is a necessity in your emergency bin.

#### **4. A well-stocked school – What to have on hand and where**

Emergency supplies should be kept in every classroom and office, along with a larger cache of supplies for the school kept in an outdoor location on campus. Supplies need to be kept in every classroom and office so that they can be easily accessed and available for immediate on-the-spot use during a lockdown or other situation where people cannot leave the room. In addition to first-aid supplies, make sure that each classroom has a flashlight and whistle, and provisions to construct an emergency restroom area inside the room. Keeping the first aid supplies in a backpack easily allows each teacher to bring the supplies along when evacuating.

Most of the emergency supplies for the school should be kept in a sturdy, weather-proof locked bin of some kind located outdoors away from any possible hazards. This will give you the best ability to access your supplies in a disaster. In this bin should be water for your entire school population, extensive first aid and triage supplies, and equipment for search-and-rescue and fire suppression. Don't forget to stock general office supplies and student and staff data. Organize the bin so that the supplies needed first following a large-scale emergency can be accessed easily. For some of your drills, open the bin and practice using the supplies.

#### **5. Organizing in a disaster – Who should do what**

Every school site administrator should be familiar with the Incident Command



with each of these categories in mind, realizing that each student's needs will differ, even within the same grouping.

Evacuation can be challenging with these students. A student with a mobility impairment may have difficulty evacuating down stairs or over uneven ground. Your staff will need to practice assistance carries that will get the student safely to even ground, and/or establish "safe areas" near stairwells where the student can wait until help arrives.

A student with a visual impairment may need to be guided, especially if the evacuation route is unfamiliar to him/her or blocked by debris. Tactile strips applied along evacuation routes indoors can help these students be self-sufficient.

A student with a hearing impairment may not be able to hear or understand instructions given over the loudspeaker or bullhorn, such as for a lockdown or when

tactile cue such as a special colored hat or vest for the students to wear during drills.

Some students will need extra assistance after disaster evacuation, too. Some students may be more fragile than others and need to be protected from the elements. Plan on using a canopy rather than a tree or roof overhang for shelter, as buildings might be unstable following a disaster. Undamaged school buses are one source of protection from the elements.

You may have students with functional needs, such as feeding or toileting. Stock supplies for these students in the school emergency bin. When necessary, designate an emergency accessible toilet station that is large enough to turn a wheelchair around in, and has a higher toilet seat and grab bars. For students who have multiple or very specific needs, your school can fill a labeled backpack with essentials. The backpack can



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System. This system takes a lot of the guess-work out of managing an emergency, and can be expanded or contracted depending on the size and nature of the emergency. It works so well in disasters because it is the same system universally used by fire, police, EMS organizations and other outside agencies that may be on scene at an emergency.

This is helpful to you at school, as it means that when the first responders get to the school, school personnel and emergency response personnel can talk about what is going on using the same language and structure. Incident Command divides the workload of an emergency into tasks, and clearly delineates who is in charge and what the chain of command is.

#### Making informed decisions

FEMA has a free online course covering Incident Command specifically for schools. The website <http://steps.lausd.net/fema> has direct links and descriptions of the FEMA courses most applicable to schools. The Incident Command System is organized hier-

archically. The incident commander is the principal (or a designee if the principal is off-campus) and is in charge of the school site and all emergency operations until an outside agency arrives and takes over the incident.

Under the principal are four pre-assigned chiefs who are school personnel and have various units reporting to them. These chiefs update the incident commander, who can then make informed decisions that are best for the school.

The first aid and search-and-rescue teams report to the operations chief, as do all of the other teams that deal directly with students or the school buildings. The planning and intelligence team oversees communication and documentation.

The logistics chief supervises supply and equipment teams as well as transportation – anything that involves moving things on or off campus. The finance and administration team accounts for staff and tracks costs associated with the incident. Assign people to these positions based on who does these

tasks well, not necessarily by their job title or rank.

ICS provides an easy way to organize non-emergency situations as well. It can be used to plan school events like a prom or school carnival, using the same breakdown of tasks. In addition to being a logical tool to plan events, using ICS in non-emergency situations allows you and your team to practice with the system, without the stress of a disaster.

Thinking ahead about emergencies that may happen and planning for those events is important. Communicating the plans to everyone affected – staff, students, parents and the community – eases anxiety, generates trust and reduces panic. Make sure that emergency planning periodically makes it to the top of your “to-do” list. ■

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